

Testimony of Kai Cotton

U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Subcommittee on Worker and Family Support
Hearing on “Making a Difference for Families and Foster Youth”

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Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify at today’s hearing.

Thank you also for your leadership in sponsoring the *Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act*. This legislation is making a difference in the lives of young people in Ohio and across the country. Later in my testimony, I’ll share some examples of how the new funding for the Chafee Program, the Education and Training Voucher Program, and the moratorium on aging out of foster care are truly life lines for young people in foster care. I hope that Congress will continue to support these policies and investments.

My name is Kai Cotton, I am a young adult from Cleveland, Ohio and currently I work as Lead Youth Navigator with A Place 4 Me – a systems change initiative to end and prevent youth homelessness in Cuyahoga County. We are hosted by YWCA Greater Cleveland, which is an organization that strives to Eliminate Racism and empower women. A Place 4 Me is also one of the 19 national sites for the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative where we strive to advance policies and practices to meet the needs of youth transitioning from foster care into adulthood. Through these partnerships, I have been given the opportunity to advocate in Ohio and nationally on behalf of youth in foster care.

I am uniquely qualified for my position as Youth Navigator and as a Jim Casey Young Fellow on the strength of my own lived experience of aging out of foster care. My first encounter with A Place 4 Me was at 19 years old when I participated in a financial literacy and matched savings program crafted for teens and young adults who have experienced foster care. This program is responsible for, if not all, a great amount of my knowledge of credit, budgeting, saving and banking. Without this program, I would still be making significant financial mistakes and learning financial literacy into my thirties because I was not taught anything about finances while I was in foster care. When I was 19, I was working a minimum wage job, balancing school, housing, and utilities all on my own. With the help of Opportunity Passport, and my hard work, I was able to save enough to match my savings for a decent vehicle. In fact, over the course of 5 years this program has not only helped me purchase one car, but two.

Cars are something especially important in my life as they were a home to me when I sunk into homelessness two years after aging out of foster care. The legislation sponsored last year by Chairman Davis and Ranking Member Walorski to create a moratorium on youth aging out of foster care is so vital because it gave young people the peace of mind to know that they would not age out of foster care into homelessness during an international crisis. As our country begins to recover from the pandemic, I think it would be exceptional for Congress to enforce a

policy around the extension of foster care to age 21 in all states. No teenager or young adult, still in their transitional brain space, should age out to homelessness ever. It's not something to just avoid during a pandemic. It's something we should try to avoid at all costs.

A term that is often used when young people like me age out of foster care is that we become "emancipated." The definition of emancipation is the process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions. It's liberation.

Through my own experience of emancipation, the feeling of liberation was very short lived. It was not very long before I felt like I was drowning in all of the barriers of adulthood with no concrete support to rely on. I spent months without electricity because I couldn't afford it. Without power, some days I had to give up buying dinner to afford my bus ride to work the next day. At the time I didn't have adults I could trust in my life, so when I ultimately ended up homeless I found myself in many uncomfortable situations. Today I see a difference in the system that released custody of me. I see the system trying to evolve into not only a temporary carrier of our youth but a bridge for us into adulthood.

I want to focus on this point about a BRIDGE. In fact, BRIDGES is the main theme I hope you take from my testimony. I invite you to picture a bridge that you've crossed in your car, on your bike, or by walking. Think about how you trusted this bridge to carry you safely from one side to another, protecting you from the deep waters below and leading you to your destination.

Young people who are leaving foster care need that same trusted bridge as they transition from foster care to adulthood, considering the unfortunate series of events that lead us into foster care. It's your awareness and action that will bring about the changes that can help them trust the systems to lead them out of foster care to a bright future.

In the state of Ohio our extension of foster care program is named BRIDGES. The Ohio legislature enacted the BRIDGES program in 2016 and it began serving young people in 2018. I aged out of foster care in 2015 so the BRIDGES program was not available to me, but it has served hundreds of young people over the past few years and is an important way that young people emancipating out of foster care are achieving stable housing. This program has been essential, but as its assistance is limited to age 21. I still see many young adults fall through gaps and land in instability after that age limit. As I serve and give back to youth and young adults who have had the same experiences as I did, I see now more than ever how critical the need is for ongoing services through age 26. These services will ensure that young people have reliable services to depend on as they work hard to overcome the challenges of foster care and create a bright future for themselves and their children.

The legislation you enacted in December extended Chafee transition services for youth through age 26. Please know that your decision to change that age limit in federal policy makes a huge difference in the lives of young people like me, who are struggling during those years and relying heavily on help from Chafee services. It's my hope that Congress continues to maintain this important policy.

Based on my experience and my work with youth and young adults, there is an array of core resources and supports that should be available on an ongoing basis to help us bridge safely and successfully from foster care to adulthood. These supports include:

- Stable housing
- Financial assistance and economic support
- Ongoing transitional services to age 26, which are often referred to in states as Chafee services
- Support in forming healthy connections with family and community
- Coaching and peer support and peer navigation

The youth that I now serve and myself included, have been subject to significant adversity in our young lives but we are also resilient and work hard to equip ourselves with many skills on our own. But to have real transitional support can make all the difference in our long-term success. Currently I am working on a policy advocacy project in my county to embed intense transitional supports and independent living skills into the emancipation of foster care. I call it Project Transition. My project is going strong in its development and I have even earned the partnership and championship of Cuyahoga County's Division of Children and Family Services. They understand that youth are the experts in their own experiences. I believe that with ongoing services and safety net systems that are built on the foundation of young adults' expertise in foster care, it will be possible to make a substantial difference in reversing the data on poor outcomes we see today.

Before closing, I'd like to share a bit about the importance of peer support which I referenced earlier. It is sometimes referred to as peer navigation or peer counseling. It is an incredibly effective service, like no other. I have served as a peer navigator for the past 2 years with A Place 4 Me and I can't explain what it means to me to hear over and over from youth "Kai, I wouldn't be here without you." Peer support workers bring their own personal knowledge of what it is like to live and thrive with lived experience, allowing them to connect with youth in a uniquely effective way. It changes lives and reflects to the young person what it looks like beyond the challenges of emancipating. As Congress considers how to strengthen child welfare services, I hope that federal policy will encourage and champion peer support.

Thank you for inviting me to today's hearing to share my point of view. I appreciate the Committee taking time to focus on the unique needs of young people like me who experienced foster care and faced significant challenges and barriers on our transition to adulthood. I hope you build on the laws and policies you have already enacted, including the *Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act*. And I especially hope the Congress will act to build the kind of bridge I spoke about today that includes housing options, financial assistance, ongoing transition services, peer support, and connections to trusted adults. I'd love to invite every young person coming from foster care to travel that bridge.